



RANTS & RAVES

Mel Croucher sings the praises of the all-seeing, all-knowing deity that is Google, while **Simon Edwards** will do just about anything for a quiet life – except top up his PC with 4-stroke

GOD ONLY KNOWS

Mel Croucher **RAVES**

My Uncle Lazarus hasn't been the same since a well-upholstered Maltese widow named Sabrina arrived at the Dewdrop Retirement Complex. She cajoled him to stop using the internet for his horse-racing and naturist tendencies, and instead to devote his online time to compiling the myriad names of God.

When my Uncle Lazarus started spending his pension on plug-in

memory for the ever-expanding litany, I realised he was in trouble. And so I resolved to distil the list of the myriad names of God, right down to one. It did not take me long. I used the miracle of Google. And the all-encompassing name of God is, of course, 'Google' itself.

I have been a convert to the Church of Google Applianceology since the early days, when I found it provided the answer to all my prayers. Before I found Google, it was extremely difficult to know if the old God was listening, let alone answering my prayers, but Google is always there for me, all-seeing and

all-wise, and Google's responses arrive within a couple of seconds. And lo, in the past few months Google has become all-powerful and can see into every secret corner of the hearts and souls of all creation, throughout the universe.

SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND

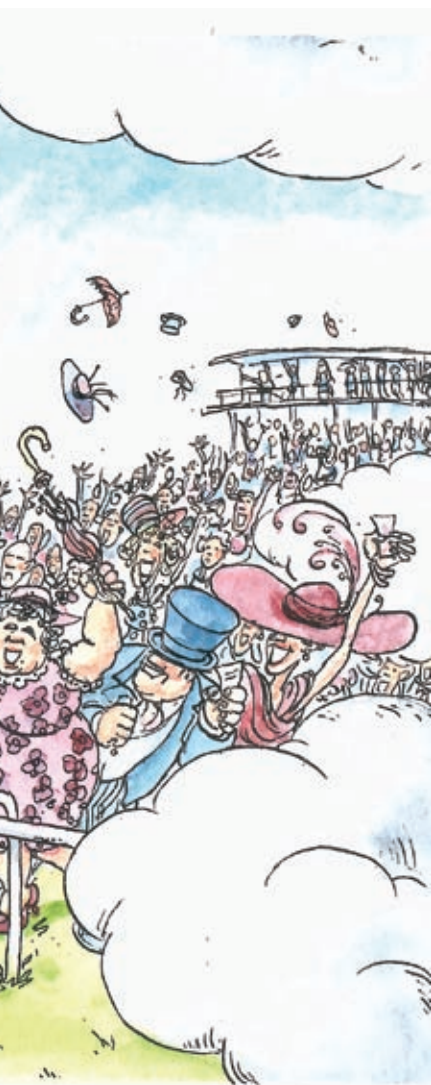
The name Google first appeared in 1925, on the pages of a novelty catalogue for tin toys made in Germany. This earthly manifestation in human form was an ethnic head where "Google's eyes revolve separately or together for a most ridiculous and laughter-provoking

item". This was an early indication that Google was a benign deity, not a vengeful one.

The first mass chanting of the name Google did not happen for another 40 years, when in the 1960s John D Loudermilk wrote his hymn *Google Eye*, giving The Nashville Teens a top 20 hit. If you don't believe me, Google this for yourself.

Another 40 years on, and the revelation of the light and the truth finally happened. In July 2005, Google registered several hundred domain names starting with earth.google.com, then moving heavenwards with moon.google.com, encompassing the planets and stars and ending up with most galaxies.

On our insignificant little planet, Google Earth combines satellite imagery with the mighty power of its search database to allow each and every one of us to gaze down from on high and observe anything we like. The old gods never let us have fun like this. Oh no, they kept all the omnipresence malarkey for themselves to enjoy. And with Google Analytics, every single aspect of human existence, including all our commercial dealings, are revealed



and it's completely free. Not like Saint Peter's redundant book-keeping system, which involved sending round the collection plate only to find out you weren't allowed through the Pearly Gates.

Verily, verily, Google is good. And it has saved my Uncle Lazarus. He is born again, judging from the Google Earth images of him and Sabrina the Maltese widow, starkers at the races.

FEEL THE FORCE

Simon
Edwards

RANTS

In the 1970s MI5 explored the possibilities of detecting liars by using a crack team of highly trained gerbils. The Israelis had been working with the rodent agents in an effort to detect terrorists at airports. These creatures could smell your fear and would inform on stressed baddies by pressing a button whenever they caught a whiff of adrenalised sweat. They were then rewarded by food. Mossad has denied rumours that some sneaky critters pressed the buttons whenever they felt peckish.

Eventually the Israelis canned the project because, sensitive though the gerbils were, they were unable to detect the difference between someone bricking it because he was packing a tonne of Semtex and someone with a fear of flying. One can only imagine the trauma done to aviaphobes who, having shakily approached passport control, were pounced upon by secret services agents while, in the background, a handful of mirthful gerbils tucked into a fresh dispatch of sunflower seeds. Would they now have to add zoophobia, claustrophobia and rubber-hose-phobia to the list?

Thankfully, MI5 took notice of this débâcle and declined to start recruiting the unreliable sniffers. However, the ability to detect emotions automatically and use this information to prevent disaster has remained an attractive proposition. Now, thanks to research at the Fraunhofer Institute for Computer Graphics in Germany, computers can detect when we feel aggressive or excited, and react accordingly.

Boffins have been working round the clock to ensure that, when we lose our rag with our PCs, we'll give ourselves away (facially and through the sweat on our palms), giving the computer time to take evasive action. But, although I've spent five minutes thinking about this rather than five years actually looking into the specifics, I think I've found a fatal flaw in the premise.

FROWN AND OUT

Think about all the times that you've been cross with your PC. Were many of them related to the computer screwing up and crashing? In such cases, Windows is going to have a job saving your data, let alone noticing that you're annoyed. But let us then assume that the PC is very stable and able to notice your frown.

This frown has not been caused by a crash. Instead, perhaps you are puzzling over a tricky spreadsheet, doing a hard online Sudoku or trying to manoeuvre your photo-editing program's cursor delicately in a subtle bit of photo editing. Imagine how pleased you would be if your PC then pre-emptively shut down in an effort to protect your data. Or promptly popped up a message advising a screen break because "you appear to be tired". Of course I'm tired! It's 3am and I've got a deadline in the morning – leave me alone!

Will the system confuse a lustful expression with pain or disgust? Visitors to pornographic websites might have their viewing curtailed – which is quite right, of course. Will playing disturbingly

realistic and violent games cause the system to call the police – "you appear to be homicidal"? Time will tell, but don't be surprised if Big Brother gets in on the act.

The more your PC knows about you the more the government, hackers and other shady individuals can find out about you. I'd rather trust the gerbils. At least they're only in it for the seeds.

SHUSH FUND

Simon
Edwards

RAVES

Noisy PCs can be a great irritant and some companies are doing a thriving business in selling accessories designed to kill the whines, buzzes and whirs that emanate from home computers. These gadgets range from large, slow cooling fans to super-sized heat sinks and hard disk enclosures that muffle one of the computer's noisiest components. Now those in search of a silent PC can add 10 litres of cooking oil to their shopping list.

Before you run down to Sainsbury's to buy an extra large bottle of Jamie's finest virgin olive oil, please bear in mind that you can't just tip it into your PC case and expect everything to run well. However, with a few modifications computer enthusiasts have discovered that it is possible to top up your computer with oil, reducing the noise to zero and allowing it to run properly.

OIL BE DAMNED

First of all, you need a sealed, waterproof case. Second, the power supply and hard disk need to be fitted outside the case, as they won't like being submerged. And that's about it. The oil won't cause your PC to short-circuit, and should remove heat from the chips more effectively than air.

The insane geniuses who proved this works ran an experiment using vegetable oil, although they recommend engine oil. Ideally, whatever you use won't contain high levels of fatty acid that can attack the electronic circuits.

There are a few more gotchas. Unless the processor is glued to the motherboard, the oil can seep underneath and start to detach it. Crashing will ensue. You probably don't want to house your PC anywhere near expensive carpets either, as accidental leakage will result in horrible staining, as well as a fried computer.

You'll also need to buy a silent power supply and a hard disk

enclosure. The only further requirement is that you have far too much time on your hands. You can read more about this interesting endeavour, as well as look at photos of a oil-filled PC, at www.toms-hardware.com/2006/01/09/strip-out_the_fans. I dare you to try it.

ON THE CARDS

Simon
Edwards

RANTS

I know we bang on about backups a lot in the pages of *Shopper* – what point is there in spending hours making data when you could lose it in an instant? – but one thing we rarely mention is the quality of the materials with which you make a backup. Did you know that a cheap recordable CD will last up to two years before the data starts to warp? After that, you can kiss a fond farewell to your photos, tax records and home movies.

Even the posh CD-Rs you can buy for a few more pence only last five years, according to Kurt Gerecke, a physicist and storage expert at IBM Deutschland. So maybe hard disks are the way forward? Apparently even these are risky, and you'd be best off opting for a 7,200rpm model to avoid buying a cheap unit with a lower quality bearing – the bit in the middle of the disk that will eventually wear out.

The ultimate solution is, of course, to save everything to magnetic tape that, Herr Gerecke notes, has a lifespan of 30 to 100 years. What a brilliant idea. Soon every home will look like a James Bond baddie base, complete with wall-mounted reels of tape and accompanying men in white coats with clipboards.

I've got an even better idea, though. Let's go back to punched cards. They are immune to stray magnetic fields, spilled coffee (if you let them dry out) and sunlight, and they have no moving parts. If we make them out of papyrus then our descendants will be able to gasp with amazement at evidence of our enormous mobile phones, laughably tight/flared trousers and the fact that we were using something as ridiculously low-powered and unreliable as PCs. **CS**

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